

73
A DEFENCE of the SUBSCRIPTIONS required
in the CHURCH of ENGLAND.

A
SERMON,
PREACHED BEFORE THE
UNIVERSITY of CAMBRIDGE,
ON THE
COMMENCEMENT SUNDAY, 1757.

By W. S. POWELL, D.D.
THEN FELLOW, NOW MASTER, OF ST. JOHN'S COLLEGE.

The FOURTH EDITION.

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IN THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

S E R M O N

PREDICATED BEFORE THE

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

OF THE



BY W. S. POWELL, D.D.

THIRD EDITION, NOW REPRINTED, OF ST JOHN'S COLLEGE

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W. S. Powell

I COR. i. 10.

NOW I BESEECH YOU, BRETHREN, BY THE NAME OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST, THAT YE ALL SPEAK THE SAME THING, AND THAT THERE BE NO DIVISIONS AMONG YOU.

IT may be doubted, whether among the parties, into which the christians at Corinth were divided, and which the apostle with so much earnestness endeavours to reunite, there was any distinction, but of names. For tho' one said, I am of Paul; and another, I of Apollos; or, I of Cephas; we hear of no difference in the instruction, they had received from their different masters. The same doctrine, which Paul had planted, Apollos watered. And yet it was not unworthy the wisdom of the apostle to guard his converts against those mischiefs, which frequently arise from frivolous and unmeaning divisions. It is usually of more importance to the peace and happiness of a community, that its members should speak, than think alike. For they, who have learned to confess their faith in the same form, will consider each other as friends,

even tho' they should disagree, not a little, in their explanations of it; while such, as have been accustomed to different expressions, can seldom be convinced, that their opinions are the same.

FOR these reasons, the wisest and best friends of our religious establishment have long wished, that all the Protestants in this kingdom could be united by a consent to the same liturgy, and the same articles of faith; not a consent forced, or feigned; but given freely, and sincerely; notwithstanding some small difference of sentiments, about points of speculation or ceremonies. To promote this union, much has been already done by those, who have explained, with moderation and clearness, the several parts of our ecclesiastical constitution. But something may remain to be done hereafter. In the mean time some difficulties may perhaps be removed, which have arisen from too rigid an interpretation of our subscriptions and declarations of conformity. They have been interpreted too rigidly by zealots on both sides, with different designs: by some among our friends, lest they should be thought luke-warm in defence of the church: by many among our enemies, that the compliance required of them might appear the less reasonable.

BUT

BUT while both parties have persisted in this rigour, both have suffered by it. The Dissenters have been rendered obstinate, in matters perfectly insignificant. They continue to debase religion with those frivolous disputes, which had been long ago forgot; if it had not been supposed necessary for every man to determine them, before he could assent to our liturgy. Among us some few examples have been known of honest, but mistaken, men, who, tho' educated for the ministry, have refused to comply with the terms of admission into it. Others perhaps there are, not less unhappy, who, having neither understanding to clear their doubts, nor courage to own them, are prevailed on by worldly motives to assent without conviction. It may enable us to remove some of their scruples, and to vindicate our church, which has imposed, and ourselves, who have submitted to these conditions; if we observe carefully their nature and extent, and examine how far our opinions are restrained by them. Such an enquiry, when confined to a discourse of this kind, must be very general. But a very general enquiry will be sufficient to shew, that great liberty is left for a difference of judgments, in matters either not plain, or not im-

portant ; so great indeed, that one might reasonably hope it would extend to every man, whose principles are not destructive of our church or nation.

I WILL not enter here into any debate with those, who, calling themselves servants of Jesus Christ, and members of the Catholic church, assert their freedom from all human impositions, and will not submit to any terms of communion ; like him, who refused to be made a citizen of Athens, because he was already a citizen of the world. Should a man adhere to this principle, he could never join in any public worship. Not only the times, and places, and ceremonies of it, but the words also, must either be appointed by common consent, or chosen by him, who presides in each congregation. And that conscience must be strangely perverse, which can submit to the directions of a single person, and not to the authority of the public. I shall therefore presume, that a liturgy may be prescribed. And if it is prescribed, it is plainly necessary, that such as are appointed to officiate publicly, should conform to it. And he, who can honestly conform, may honestly declare his resolution to do so. Thus the enquiry, which a man is obliged to make, before

fore he can assent to the use of our liturgy, and promise to officiate himself according to it, is reduced to narrow limits. If it requires him to profess doctrines which he does not believe; or if he judges either the whole, or its principal parts, to be vain, trifling, or superstitious; his assent will be sinful. But unless sincerity forbids the use of this service, or the main purposes of religion demand another, whatever difficulties may be proposed, they should have little influence on his determination.

To the former part of this question some observations may be applied, which shall be made presently on our articles of faith. Let us only remark here, that it is confined almost entirely to the creeds; that it has no concern in the issue of any disputes, which have been raised about the truth of various minute particulars, asserted, or supposed, in the service, or rubrics. If, for instance, the inquirer doubts, whether Luke the physician, was also the evangelist; or knows, that, after all the corrections of the ablest astronomers, the rules for finding Easter, are not perfectly consistent; these will be no reasons against his conformity. To give a title to a saint, or a king, which perhaps might not properly belong to him; or to celebrate a festival rather
according

according to the decree of a pope, than a council; will hardly disgust a man of the nicest conscience: unless it is supposed to contain a declaration of his judgment. But his assent is to be given to the use, not the truth, of the liturgy; and cannot be understood to extend farther, than to an approbation of the doctrines, which it openly professes, or with which it has an evident and necessary connection. Thus the law, which requires his assent, explains it; thus common sense requires it to be explained. Nobody ever asks concerning a petition, or a rule, whether it be true; but whether it be decent, proper, reasonable, useful. If such be our public service, we may do more than assent to it; we may heartily and thoroughly approve it.

BUT even this part of its character has been sometimes examined too scrupulously. We meet with demands on one side, and boasts on the other, of such perfection, as never was found, nor probably ever will be, in any human composition. And whence have these demands, and these boasts arisen? From a notion many have entertained, that they must allow of nothing, in the worship of God, which is not perfect: a notion connected indeed with an important truth, that our public adorations

adorations should be performed with all the purity and solemnity, which the wisest can devise; but strained to a pernicious error, that every defect, which the weakest may imagine, will justify a refusal to join in them. Nothing was ever written on any subject, nothing certainly on so difficult a subject as religion, which, after time and attention, was not found capable of improvement: and yet there are many religious books, which the most cautious might venture to recommend. Even in the holy Scripture itself, some portions have been thought less proper to be publicly read; and yet no christian will scruple to declare, that it is profitable for reproof, for exhortation, for instruction in righteousness. Why then is the liturgy to be rejected, for want of that imaginary perfection, which no book, not even the book of God, has ever obtained?

BUT it may perhaps be replied, that the difficulties arise not from the want of some supposed excellency, but from real blemishes; from blemishes, which have been observed long ago, and their remedies proposed. Be it that you are thus convinced. But is there in our liturgy any absurdity so glaring, as to be visible to every eye? Is there any impiety so monstrous, as to shock every devout worshipper

shipper? Our most scrupulous adversaries never pretended it. Their complaints relate chiefly to those appointments, in which there was the greatest room for a difference in our judgments or fancies. Of what length the public service should be, into how many parts it may conveniently be divided, what passages of the Scriptures ought to be intermixed with it, how often some of our most important petitions may be repeated, either in the same, or a different form; these, and such as these, are the matters in controversy: matters of so uncertain a nature, that it might be difficult to find two thinking men, if even thinking men were not guided by fashion, who would determine them exactly alike. It must therefore often happen, that they, who will not withdraw themselves from all religious assemblies, will be obliged to comply with forms, which they do not wholly approve. The same answer may be given in all disputes concerning the ceremonies observed in public worship. Whether it be more decent, on one occasion, for the minister to kneel, on another, for the people to sit, can never be determined by any principles of reason. The greatest part of mankind always think that ceremony right, to which they have been accustomed. Nor are they much mistaken,
For

For in matters of this sort nothing is plainly wrong, but change. But whether the point in dispute be of greater or of less importance, capable of being exactly defined or not; yet he, who, without public authority, assumes to himself the determination of it, assumes a power, which every man might claim, with equal reason, and which, if every man should exercise, all united worship must totally cease.

IN other cases similar to this, which we are considering, men do not perplex themselves with the same difficulties. It was never agreed, what is the most convenient form of civil government. Yet except some few, whose enthusiasm has approached to madness, all have, without scruple, submitted to every form; while it answered in any degree the principal purposes of its institution. The laws of particular countries or societies oblige us in many instances, where the law of nature has left us at liberty; nay, they often oppose the law of nature, where its commands are either obscure or not important. Yet these things offend no man's conscience. We not only consent to be governed by imperfect or unreasonable laws, without fear of displeasing God; but are ready to declare that consent, whenever it is demanded. Nor let it be pretended;
that

that the affairs of civil life are more indifferent, or more subject to human prudence, than those of religion. The virtue and knowledge and happiness of a people certainly depend as much on the form of their government, and the nature of their laws, as on the ceremonies of their public worship. Let the decision therefore in both cases proceed on the same principles ; and then every man, who thinks our liturgy a pious and useful, tho' not a faultless, service, will think himself obliged to conform to it.

It will easily be understood, with what view these reasons are offered: not to intimate, that of all the difficulties, which our adversaries have heaped together, any part remains unremoved; but to convince them, that the removal was more than they could reasonably demand: it not being a condition of union in our church, that even its ministers should acknowledge every thing in the public service, to be exactly what is best and fittest. Nothing more is required of them, but to profess by words, what they profess in the strongest manner, by their entrance into the ministry; that in their minds they assent to, and will follow in their practice, the prescribed forms of prayer. So that the true meaning of this declaration must have been mistaken,

mistaken, if it has ever driven one man from our communion.

BUT our other subscription is to be understood in a different manner. Our articles of religion are not merely articles of peace. They are designed also as a test of our opinions. For since it cannot be imagined, that men should explain with clearness, or enforce with earnestness, or defend with accuracy of judgment, such doctrines as they do not believe; the church requires of those, who are appointed to teach religion, a solemn declaration of their faith. Nor is it more unreasonable to exclude a man from this office, who, through error, unavoidable, suppose, and innocent error, is unfit to execute it; than to deny him a civil employment, for which he is accidentally disqualified.

HE therefore, who assents to our articles, must have examined them, and be convinced of their truth. But their truth perhaps might have been obscured with fewer doubts and difficulties, had men attended to the proper method of interpreting them. It cannot appear strange, that there should be rules of interpretation peculiar to these writings, when the design of interpreting them is peculiar.

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We are not here concerned to discover, what was meant by the writers, but what will be understood by the readers. For every sincere man, who makes a public declaration, will consider it as meaning, what it is usually conceived to mean. I will not add, by those, who require this declaration; not by the governors of the church, because they cannot properly be said to require that, which they have no authority to dispense with or alter; not by the legislature, because their sense we shall never be able to determine, but by the general voice of learned men through the nation.

BUT if our articles are to be thus explained, will they not be rendered uncertain and useless by a variety of inconsistent senses? Where shall we fix the standard of public opinion? Will not every whimsical interpreter find some followers, whom he may call the learned of the nation; and give the colour of public authority to his own inventions? Without doubt the method proposed admits some variety of interpretations. And what other does not? The larger its compass is, the more honest men will it comprehend; and perhaps there is no danger, even in times of the greatest freedom and candor, that it should become too wide. But what its limits ought to

to be, is no part of our inquiry. It is sufficient if we can determine what they are; what difference of judgments is allowed among those, who may, nevertheless, agree without scruples in the same confession of their faith.

AND wherever an article is expressed in such general terms, as will fairly contain several particular opinions; there certainly it is sufficient for him, who subscribes, to be convinced, that some one of those opinions is true. To confirm this, if it be not too evident to receive any confirmation, it has been said, that this latitude of expression was chosen, on purpose to admit, within the pale of the church, men of various and even opposite principles. And the clergy have been exhorted, by the royal authority, to shut up all disputes, in the general meaning of the articles; that meaning, which, in some curious points of controversy, persons of every denomination have supposed to be on their side.

BUT they are not only general words, which are capable of different interpretations. Such as were originally determinate, by length of time and change of circumstances, may become ambiguous. Custom can take away the
C force

force of expressions, or give them a new meaning. And where the original sense is one, the received another, the subscriber is at liberty to use them in either. That he may understand them in their most obvious and primitive signification, will scarce be doubted. And yet if there is any place for doubt, it can be only here. That he may understand them, as they are usually understood, cannot be denied, unless we also deny the meaning of words to be arbitrary and changeable. That payment is honestly made, which is reckoned according to the value the money now bears, however it may have varied since its first coinage. And truth is then fairly spoken, when each expression has the full weight for which it generally passes. Nor are these changes of the sense unusual, even in our most solemn forms. The passages of the Psalms or other Scriptures, which make a part of our daily devotions, cannot always be applied by every christian, as they were by the writers. And yet nothing could be more contemptible, than to object to them on this account. How unjust then is the charge brought against the English clergy, that, having departed from the meaning of their articles, they all continue to subscribe what none believes. The accusation is not only false, but the crime impossible.

That

That cannot be the sense of any declaration, which no one imagines to be the sense ; nor can that interpretation be erroneous, which all have received. With whatever violence it was at first introduced, yet possession is always a sufficient title ; and a long and quiet possession renders that title indisputable.

THIS, indeed, is more than it is necessary to claim. Doubtful pretensions in these disputes are equivalent to the clearest. It is sufficient to justify the use of any explanation, that it has been openly declared, and not generally condemned. And therefore when an article has been understood, by good and learned interpreters, in a sense, neither the most obvious, nor the most usual ; he, who assents to it, is at liberty to follow their guidance, or to join himself to the multitude. When the expressions he must use, are ambiguous, (and they are made ambiguous by different explanations of them) what he affirms, is in part unknown ; and so far as it is unknown cannot be false. They, who believe him to have departed from the truth, may blame his want of judgment, not his want of sincerity.

ANOTHER use may be made of this variety of interpretations. It may help to explain the nature and force of that assent, which is given to the articles; to shew, that it was never conceived to have so much rigour, as would exclude all improvements from theology. For as new discoveries have sprung up, new explanations have been gradually framed and adapted to them; and almost every commentator has added something to the common stock. And if among this great variety, a free inquirer should not find all his own opinions, the same liberty of adding to it still remains. It must be used indeed with caution. But every minute difference will not oblige him to dissent; because for the same reason every interpreter of our articles, and perhaps every thinking man must have dissented also.

THE liberty here mentioned is such as cannot be precisely marked out, and is therefore liable to abuse. But so are many moral rules, which are nevertheless both reasonable and useful: so are all the rules of civil liberty, which are yet of the greatest importance to the happiness of mankind. And I shall venture to add another observation on this subject, tho'

tho' it may be attended with the same difficulty. Not only the propositions, to which we assent, but the assent itself may be differently understood. The circumstances of the persons, who give it, create this difference. It must be conceived to be given with more solemnity and more exactness by him who professes to study every branch of religious knowledge, than by one engaged chiefly in other pursuits; by a man of mature judgment, than by a youth just beginning to exercise his reason. It is not necessary, that these distinctions should be made by public authority. The common sense of mankind will introduce them. But many of them, who are called upon to subscribe, it is urged, have neither the age nor the learning necessary to make them competent judges of such abstruse points; their weakness is imposed upon; they assent before they have examined. And without question these nice casuists could as easily have shewn the impiety of teaching children the creed. A public confession of our faith, they might say, is a solemn thing; some parts of it they will not understand till after many years, some perhaps never. All this would be very true, but very trifling. Every one perceives that a creed in the mouths of children is not a testimony

mony of their assent. On such subjects they are unable to speak either truth or falsehood. But from them, who have advanced a little farther into life, a little more may be expected. They may acknowledge themselves members of the church of *England*; and declare, that they have no objection to her articles, but a general Belief of them grounded partly on their own observations, and partly on the authority of others. And nothing farther, I suppose, does any man conceive to be meant by their subscriptions.

UPON the whole it appears, that, in the approbation we give of the established doctrines, there is much reasonable liberty: That we may understand them in any of those senses, which the general words comprehend, or to which the received interpretation of these doctrines, or the judgments of able interpreters have extended them: That we are not confined strictly even to this compass; but may allow ourselves, if it seems necessary, to differ as much from former interpreters, as they have frequently done from each other: And lastly, that there is room for various degrees of assent according to the various ages and abilities of the subscribers. Well then may we

we be surpris'd, when any who call themselves our friends, and the friends of freedom, propose to alter the liturgy and articles, and accommodate them to the prejudices of Dissenters. Such a compliance, once made, would give occasion to perpetual changes ; and every change to fresh Disputes. For who shall fashion our new systems ? Where are the men, who have no favourite notions to inculcate, no hated heresy to condemn ? Or were men found equally moderate and more learned than our first reformers ; yet would not a constitution newly framed be for that reason less flexible ? Time itself seems to have procured for us much of that ease we enjoy. Let us therefore, as far as belongs to us, endeavour to maintain our religious establishment ; and let us interpret the conditions of it with that candor, which will allow the greatest room for improvements in sacred knowledge, and unite with us the greatest number of sincere protestants.

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I shall not be able, and perhaps we the young
of number of answers to your letter.



